

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

MS patient has 'energy to burn' after new procedure

Two Canadian research teams set to test Italian scientist's blocked-vein theory

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Steve Garvie has “energy to burn,” can bathe himself and rarely uses his wheelchair – a much different picture from just a few months ago.

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis about 10 years ago and desperate for more control over his body, Mr. Garvie underwent a procedure in January that unblocked a vein in his neck – a potentially groundbreaking method of treating MS that was first introduced by Italian doctor Paolo Zamboni.

“I’ve been getting better all the time. I’m doing just fine,” Mr. Garvie, 53, said from Barrie, Ont.

The potential treatment is still in its preliminary stage. And as researchers in Canada and around the world lay the groundwork to test Dr. Zamboni’s theory, the doctor, along with Buffalo researchers, will present findings at the American Academy of Neurology’s annual meeting in Toronto on Wednesday.

Dr. Zamboni’s study on the degenerative condition has sparked both hope and controversy. He believes MS is a vascular condition, caused by blocked or malformed veins responsible for draining blood from the brain, and can be treated with surgery. It is a departure from conventional thinking that MS is an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks myelin, a fatty substance that coats nerve cells.

Dr. Zamboni found that in 90 per cent of people with MS, including his spouse, the veins draining blood from the brain were malformed or blocked. But many in the medical community have been skeptical of his work because it is preliminary, with a small sample size, and has been heavily promoted before going through the rigorous research process.

Despite the skeptics, Mr. Garvie and other MS patients have been seeking out the treatment, which involves a simple surgical procedure, angioplasty. A few clinics in Canada offer it, including one in Barrie. Mr. Garvie’s surgery took less than an hour, and just moments afterward he could move his left hand and left leg, which he couldn’t do before.

Patients, eager for a remedy, are also seeking out researchers who are about to embark on studies.

“There has been significant e-mail traffic, voice-mail traffic,” said Ian Rodger, vice-president of research and academic at St. Joseph’s Healthcare in Hamilton, Ont. “There’s been a lot of phone calls that have come into a variety of places, some to my office, some to my colleagues’ office. Certainly in the thousands.”

A team of doctors from McMaster University, St. Joseph's Healthcare and Hamilton Health Sciences has been set up to test Dr. Zamboni’s theory. Another team involves researchers at the University of [British Columbia](#) and the University of Saskatchewan. Researchers will study the

veins in the brains of long-suffering patients and healthy people to see if there is a difference between them.

Both teams are waiting for approval from the ethics board, and trying to secure funding before moving ahead with the trials. If all goes as planned, they hope to have preliminary results within a year.

“We’re anxious to get going. But at the same time, this needs to be studied properly,” said Lindsay Machan, associate professor in radiology at the University of British Columbia. “It’s a really intriguing theory that Dr. Zamboni has come up with, and there have been some patients who seemed to have had some really impressive responses.”

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